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THE AUSTRALIAN WOMAN AND THE BALLOT.

BY ALICE HENRY.

WHILE suffragists and anti-suffragists are mostly compelled by the nature of the case to argue from either the logic or the sentiment of the position, and are continually driven to anticipate possible results, it may be of interest to the public in the United States to review the history of the movement in Australia, the country where the reform has been effected on by far the completest scale ever attempted or ever accomplished. A sketch of the Australian Constitution, an analysis of the causes that there led up to woman's enfranchisement, and an account of the methods successfully adopted there will show the points of resemblance and of difference between the movement in the United States and in Australia.

Up to the close of the nineteenth century, the seven colonies in the Australasian group were not only entirely independent of one another politically, but there was comparatively little co-operation between organized bodies and parties having similar aims in these different provinces. Even though railroad and steamship and telegraph were ever bringing the Colonies nearer together, distance, combined with the fact of distinct governments, seemed to make united action upon the part of any one set of people when scattered all over the continent at once difficult and futile. In common, therefore, with all other forms of political action, the propaganda for woman suffrage and the opposition thereto were carried on quite separately in the several colonies.

The experience of Victoria, however, as the colony in which the agitation was first started, may be taken as typical of what happened in all the others. The first legislative move was made in 1873, when the Hon. George Higinbotham, afterwards Chief

Justice of the Colony, introduced as an amendment to an electoral bill a clause which, if passed, would have conferred the franchise upon women upon the same terms as those on which it was then held by men. The amendment was, of course, rejected, and subsequent attempts of the same nature met with no better success. It was not till 1884 that agitation outside of the legislature was seriously attempted. In that year, the redoubtable Mrs. Dugdale, backed by Mrs. Lowe—who in earlier days had done pioneering of a rougher sort, having been the first white woman to settle in the far west of Queensland,—Mr. Higinbotham himself and others formed the first Australian woman-suffrage society. Slowly, as it seemed to them, but very speedily indeed as it may appear in the retrospect, public opinion was being educated; and, by the early nineties, a number of circumstances combined to give the movement a forward impulse. The first of these was the return to Victoria of Miss Annette Bear (afterwards Mrs. Bear-Crawford), who, during many years spent in England, had been associated with such women as Mrs. Fawcett, Mrs. Percy Bunting, Mrs. Sheldon Amos and other veteran workers in the cause. She brought with her plans for combining the efforts of scattered societies into a United Council. About this time, also, the Labor Party came into existence and soon began to make itself felt in politics. Few of its leaders at first realized what a menace to themselves and their interests was the unrepresented woman in industry. With the closer organization of the Victorian Labor Party, that negative position was abandoned, the subject of woman suffrage was raised out of theoretical fogs and supported consistently by the Party. Repeatedly was a woman-suffrage bill passed by the Lower House, and as invariably was it rejected by the Upper House, a curious fossilized product, composed of landowners, nominally elected on a high property qualification, but as a matter of fact rarely elected at all, so seldom had its members to risk their seats by any process so disagreeable as an election.

Meanwhile, in the other Colonies, matters were not standing still. The New Zealand suffragists had gained their object in 1893. The 1st of January, 1895, saw the South-Australian women dowered with the vote. Western-Australian women followed suit in 1899, the change there being, for political reasons, supported by the Conservatives.

Now entered a curiously complicating factor. On the first day of the new century, the five continental Colonies and Tasmania united into the Australian Commonwealth, New Zealand, on account largely of the fifteen hundred miles of rough sea which separated her from the others, standing apart. This meant a severing of all Australian legislation into two parts—national and state. National matters—including, for instance, tariffs, currency, mails, defence—were taken over by the newly constituted Federal Houses. State affairs were confined to such local interests as education, the care of children, crime, sanitation and agriculture. Under the new control, the women of South and Western Australia, because they had previously enjoyed the privilege of a state vote, automatically acquired the Federal vote. The women of the other Colonies (hereafter to be styled states), because they had had no voice in the management of state affairs, and for no other reason, were denied the privilege in relation to the larger national affairs. The Federal Parliament did not long leave matters in that unsatisfactory position. In its very first session, the Australian Parliament grafted on to the Act providing for its own future election a clause equalizing the political rights of men and women throughout the Commonwealth, giving to all adult women the right to vote for members of both Federal Houses. The ease with which this victory was won was due partly to the educative campaign that had for thirty years been carried on in all the states separately and in all the state houses from among the members of which the first Federal members were mostly drawn, and partly to the extremely broad and democratic basis of the Federal Constitution and the direct methods of election and representation prescribed. As it appears to me, the main point in which Australia differs politically from the United State lies here, in the more direct, and therefore more effective, mode of giving expression to the popular will.

This step on the part of the Federal Government facilitated the task of those who were struggling for state enfranchisement in New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania. Even conscientious opponents recognized that to give to women a voice in national matters and to prevent them from sharing in the control of matters regarding which their knowledge was presumably both sounder and wider and their interest far more keen, would be a trifle inconsistent, not to say ludicrous. So, between 1902 and

1905, the state vote was conferred upon women in all these states. And now, alone among her sisters, it is the Victorian woman who, though she can express her views upon some obscure question of currency or patent rights, has no power to say whether or not Melbourne shall have a juvenile court.

In all probability, Australian women would not have had the ballot to-day if they had not concentrated all their forces upon the effort to secure it. It is sometimes difficult for a good woman to stop her ears when so many moral and industrial evils are crying for remedy, and to confine herself to urging so apparently remote and academic a remedy as the vote. But the argument there—and it has proved a sound one in this instance—was that the vote alone, when once secured, could bring about quickly, and with no waste of energy, reforms that otherwise must lag slow-footed behind legislation far less urgent and important. Consequently, because the women workers asked for this one thing and would be satisfied with nothing but this one thing, neither the energy of the women nor the interest of legislators and the public was dissipated and scattered.

Of all the plans tried in the campaign—petitioning, newspaper correspondence, public meetings and the persistent questioning in writing of candidates and legislators—the last seems to have been the only one that was worth the labor bestowed upon it. For years, every candidate for every office was questioned as to his views on this one subject. His answer, or the fact of his not answering, was filed; a careful record was kept of his subsequent speeches and votes, and he was called upon, politely but firmly, to explain any inconsistency between promise and performance.

If those Australian women who asked for the suffrage possessed one advantage over their American sisters in the comparative directness of electoral representation, they had another in the simplicity of the Constitution, both state and Federal. Even the Victorian women have had only two legislative bodies to convert, and no additional outside body of voters. No governor would veto a bill granting the franchise to women when passed by an absolute majority of both houses, nor has the Royal assent to a bill ever been denied under similar circumstances. Again, it told in their favor that the movement was never a fashionable one, the men and women who supported and labored for it having

been, with few exceptions, of the working classes, so that the question was presented to the average working-class elector unhampered by any misleading or suspicion-breeding disguise.

The use of the future tense, so freely resorted to in discussions on woman and the use she will make of the ballot as a reason why she should or should not have it, is in practice discounted. "Hope thou not much, and fear not thou at all" is a sentiment that may well be impressed both upon those who expect impossibilities and upon those who dread imaginary evils. Ardent Radicals and cautious Conservatives among us have alike learned that results, either as seen in legislation or as traceable in changes in the mental outlook of women themselves, are wholesomely gradual. It is well that it should be so, that women should but slowly assume their full political responsibilities.

As regards educative effects, those have been most strikingly seen among conservative women. These have organized and taken part in movements for legislative reform, sometimes on party lines, more often on non-party lines, to an extent unknown before. There are also many proofs that there is a good deal of family discussion of public questions, of an unquestionably educative tendency, now that the women of the family are no longer ciphers, but openly acknowledged citizens. But, while the family which has added a new stock of subjects to the interest of breakfast-table conversation is so common as to attract no notice, the family disintegrated by political differences has not yet been unearthed, even by the most obstinate legislative councillor. I have been present at many political meetings, and at several elections in more than one state, and I have exercised my own vote. I have never, upon one single occasion, had reason to wish myself or other women away. The meetings have improved in tone and in earnestness; and women have, with Tennyson's ideal wife, gained in breadth of view. The polling-booths are as respectable as the vestibule of a railroad depot or a theatre, and the process of voting is as simple as that of buying a ticket. The ordinary housewife votes during the slack hours when she would be out marketing, very likely, anyway, the baby—who was to be, so we were told, so hopelessly neglected when his mother took to politics—often accompanying her in his go-cart.

The argument that women will not vote is completely disproved by Australian experience. They not only vote, but they

vote in continually increasing numbers as time goes on, and they become educated up to a sense of their political responsibilities and all that these imply. Not all the states discriminate in their returns between men and women voters, but those that do show something like the following: In South Australia, at the last general election, 59 per cent. of the men on the rolls voted, and 42 per cent. of the women; in Western Australia, 49 per cent. of the men and 47 per cent. of the women voted; at the last Federal election, 56 per cent. of the men voted, and 40 per cent. of the women. None of the Australian states has yet reached the extraordinary record of New Zealand, where, in 1902, nearly 75 per cent. of the women electors recorded their votes, as against 76 per cent. of their brothers.

It is unnecessary to add that the conservative woman votes. Her husband or father and their newspaper take good care that the duty of doing so is well impressed upon her, even though abstractly they may all three disapprove of woman in politics, and have striven to avert her appearing in that arena as long as they possibly could.

In the legislative world, the trend of the laws whose passage has been brought about, or hastened, by the direct political action of women is very clear. These constitute, largely, measures to remove disabilities from women and improve the condition of children, particularly homeless or neglected children. It is probably true that very few measures can be named which cannot sooner or later be obtained in other countries by the old, slow, indirect methods; but it is quite certain that there is no other country which can point to such a series of reforms brought about in such a short time, with so little friction and with such a minimum expenditure of energy—energy thus left free to take up newer problems and fresh educational work. Among the measures that can be traced to woman suffrage within the last ten years are prematernity acts, acts raising the age of consent, family maintenance acts, and many acts improving children's conditions by extending juvenile courts, limiting hours of work, providing better inspection, forbidding sale to children of drink, drugs and doubtful literature.

A word as to some of the above. While no English-speaking country goes to the French extreme of forbidding inquiry as to the paternity of an illegitimate child, most of them make the

position as hard as possible for the mother by doing nothing for her in anticipation of the coming child's birth. A summons for maintenance of the child does not lie till after birth—that is, till after the time of worst trial, with its often awful collateral temptations to suicide and infanticide. Although, with a mockery of regard for the baby-life, the law indicts a girl-mother for concealment of birth, should she not make preparations for the expected event, it places in her hand no instrument through which she can obtain the means to so provide for the little one's coming. By these Australian acts, the father may be sued before the child is born, both for maintenance for the child and for the mother's expenses at the time. It is not that so many cases are brought forward, but the mere existence of a legal enactment makes it much easier for any friend of the girl's to obtain proper consideration for her from the man; and the influence of the law, too, is felt even more widely in its educative effect upon the sense of justice and the ethical standards of the community as a whole.

In Western Australia, again, where the women had pleaded for years for the raising of the age of consent, no improvement was possible till after the suffrage was granted to them, when the opinions of legislators on the subject of the protection of young girls underwent a remarkable and most sudden change.

In South Australia, where the women have been longest enfranchised, the care of neglected children is better understood, and the oversight of such children (under a state department) better controlled, than elsewhere. It was the first country in the world to have a legally constituted juvenile court. The New South Wales and Tasmania courts were among the first results of enfranchising women; while in Victoria (where alone the women do not possess the state franchise) a measure for establishing juvenile courts is still, after years of agitation, in the stage of a much-debated and very defective bill.

Any alteration in the relative industrial and economic status of men and women will be necessarily a slow process; but, in this connection, a noteworthy incident was the recent action of a Federal senator in introducing an amendment to the Public Service Act to equalize the rates of pay for men and women in the Federal Service. The significance of this fact is not that such a proposal was made, but that it emanated from such a quarter—not from an eager suffragist, but from an average politician, who

was thus giving the best possible proof that he was doing one of the things for which he had been sent into the House, attending to the interests of all his constituents, acknowledging in unconscious fashion that, as he in part owed his election to women, it was his duty to see that his electors were treated with even-handed justice. The principle has been already affirmed, and it only remains to be applied in practice.

That the welfare of the general community is subserved by the cooperation of women electors is seen by the adoption of some more general measures, such as laws dealing with the drink traffic, the gambling evil, and the sale of drugs (the importation of opium, for instance, except as specially prepared for medical purposes, being by Federal enactment entirely forbidden, throughout the Commonwealth). On all these points, the experience of Australia during the last ten years has been the same as that of New Zealand for thirteen years. The power of the best men in the community has been reinforced, and the hands of conscientious legislators strengthened by the addition of the woman's vote.

ALICE HENRY.